

What Actually Happened



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Perhaps the most hackneyed of all quotations in the philosophy of history is Ranke's remark that the task of the historian is "to show what actually happened"—though we are not so often told that Ranke's intention was to contrast showing what actually happened with judging the past and with instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. His remark was timely because judging the past and instructing the present were precisely what the ancients, who still served for models in his day, were wont to do. However, since Ranke's day it has become fashionable to deny that showing what actually happened is, or even could be, the historian's task. This has been denied for many reasons of varying kinds. Historians who set out with this ideal have concluded that it is but a 'noble dream,' because the experience of trying to write history with this aim and using the methods which this aim prescribes has led them to despair; the difficulties they encountered in the pursuit led them to conclude that the very aim was a mistaken one; and philosophers, setting out from some metaphysical or epistemological theory, have arrived at the same conclusion by a shorter route.

It is not my intention in this lecture to canvass *all* the reasons that have been advanced for rejecting Ranke's Realist position about the past; in particular, I shall say nothing about one of the most popular and persuasive arguments: that historical narratives and explanations are necessarily 'subjective' because they are necessarily infected by the individual historian's own judgments of value. That is far too big and complex a topic to be handled alongside those that I do propose to discuss. The line of thought with which I am concerned can be summed up in another convenient slogan, Oakeshott's dictum that history is "what the evidence obliges us to believe." The word 'oblige' here is perhaps a bit strong. We are obliged to believe that Lincoln was assassinated in Ford's Theater on the 14th of April, 1865, because the evidence is so copious and so unassailable that it cannot be denied; but there is a great deal that is properly called history about which the most we can say is that the evidence is strong enough to make belief more reasonable than disbelief. Historical statements, like other empirical statements, occupy a range from those which it would be madness to

doubt to those which are just a little more probable than not. The theory I want to criticise is the Constructionist theory, a theory that is arrived at, and can only be arrived at, by passing through a phase of scepticism. Roughly, the sceptic argues that there can be no such thing as historical knowledge at all; then the Constructionist tells us that there is no need to despair. We *can*, after all, have historical knowledge—only it is not the sort of thing that Ranke and his Realist followers thought it was. History is not an account of what actually happened but an account of what the evidence obliges us to believe; it is not about 'the real past,' but about 'the historical past,' which is something quite different—something constructed by the historian.

The clearest exposition of the Constructionist position is that of Leon Goldstein, who writes:

"When we say that the starting point is the evidence, we mean only that the suspicion that there were events is suggested by the fact that there are present certain things which seem not to fit into the present context of culture and life: writings that most of us cannot read, coins which will buy nothing at the grocery, ruins of buildings and of entire cities, and so on."¹

So far, so good. Though historians do not in fact cast their writings in the form of inferences from the present existence of 'documents' to the past existence of events—their works would be unreadable if they did—we are making a fair epistemological demand of them when we demand that they should be *able* to do so. If Oakeshott's slogan is taken to mean only that a historian is not entitled to assert anything 'as a fact' unless he can link it by a chain of acceptable reasoning to something that is here and now before his eyes, I have no quarrel with it—except the minor quarrel that, as I said, the word 'oblige' is too strong; some such phrase as 'puts beyond reasonable doubt' would be more appropriate. But Oakeshott and Goldstein and, as we shall soon see, some philosophizing historians, intend to say something very much more surprising and contentious than this. In telling us that history is what the evidence obliges us to believe they are *denying* Ranke's position; they are

¹ Evidence and Events in History. *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1962, p. 176.

telling us that history is *not* an account of what actually happened. This is how Leon Goldstein continues:

"No matter how diligently he has carried out his investigation, the historian never gets any nearer to the real past than he was when he began. The real past, whatever it was, has no more to do with history—the discipline—than Hylas' material substance has to do with the experienced objects that Philonous wants to talk about . . . neither the thing as it exists apart from our experience of it nor the real past figures in any human activity. . . . The past that the historian evokes is not a real past as it was when it was present, but rather a construction of his own. . . . The historical event, the only historical event that figures in the work of historians, is a hypothetical construct."²

This, which I call the Constructionist view, is by no means confined to philosophers. Forty years ago the historian Carl Becker was saying much the same thing. In the course of an essay which I shall examine in more detail later he raises the questions '*Where is the historical fact?*' and '*When is the historical fact?*'. His answers are '*Here and now in the mind of the historian.*'³

It is this view that Oakeshott's slogan conflicts with Ranke's and that Ranke's must therefore be rejected that I wish to examine; and I shall, in passing, suggest that the sceptical doubts on which Constructionism is based are bogus doubts. But not *just* bogus doubts. They are shadows, monstrous and terrifying *Doppelgaenger*, cast by very genuine difficulties that historians encounter—difficulties that are none the less genuine and none the less infuriating for being philosophically banal.

That there is *in fact* no necessary conflict between Oakeshott's slogan and Ranke's can be easily shown. For if we ask Oakeshott and his followers *just what* the evidence obliges us to believe, will their answer not have to be: It obliges us to believe that Lincoln was assassinated in Ford's Theater on April 14th, 1865, that there was a battle fought near the village of Waterloo on June 18th, 1815, that Caesar crossed the Rubicon on some date not now precisely

² Goldstein, *op. cit.* pp. 176-77.

³ What are historical facts? Reprinted in Hans Meyerhoff (Ed.) *The Philosophy of History in our time*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959, pp. 120-37.

known in 48 b.c.? The evidence obliges us to believe that these things *actually did happen*. Consider the following sentences:—

- (1) There was a battle at Waterloo in 1815.
- (2) There really was a battle at Waterloo in 1815.
- (3) The battle at Waterloo was a real battle.

And let us suppose, what the Constructionist will not deny, that the evidence obliges us to believe (1). There are many contexts in which and purposes for which (1) would be the most appropriate of these three sentences to use to express our knowledge or belief that there was a battle at Waterloo in 1815. By contrast, the range of contexts and purposes which would make (2) or (3) more appropriate than (1) are severely limited. It would be appropriate to say (2)—that there really was a battle at Waterloo in 1815—to someone who has denied that any such battle took place or has expressed doubt about it. I can think of two quite different cases in which (3)—the battle of Waterloo was a real battle—would be the most appropriate sentence to select. A child asks his father whether the battle of Waterloo took place before or after the battle between the Gods and the Giants. The battle of Waterloo, we tell him, was a real battle; that between the Gods and Giants was not. Secondly, sentence (3) might be used to assert that the battle of Waterloo was a real *battle*—not just a skirmish or affray. But what (2) and (3) assert is in no way different from what (1) asserts; and if the evidence obliges us to believe that there was a battle at Waterloo in 1815, it obliges us, by the same token, to believe that it was a real battle—something which actually happened. The illusion that it might not stems from the crude mistake of supposing that ‘real’ in the phrase ‘real battle’ functions in the way that ‘bloody,’ ‘indecisive’ or ‘unnecessary’ function. For we might be obliged by the evidence to believe that a certain battle took place but not obliged by the same evidence to believe that it was a bloody, indecisive or unnecessary battle; but we cannot be obliged by any evidence to believe that a battle took place without being obliged by that same evidence to believe that a real battle took place. Moreover, if it was not a real battle and if it did not actually happen it could not explain the present evidence which, according to the Constructionists, it is the function of battles and other events to do.

I assume, then, that it is sheer error to suppose that Oakeshott’s slogan and the theory of historiography that it enshrines conflict in

any way with Ranke's slogan and the theory of historiography that that enshrines. But the problem, as so often in philosophy, is not to point out or clear up obvious errors, but to explain why some philosophers and philosophizing historians say the extraordinary things they do say. The diagnosis involves, I believe, three related errors which are by no means trivial, but deeply embedded in some of the ways in which we, when we are not philosophizing, talk about the past. The first, which I shall lable The Spatialization of The Past, arises from our inveterate habit of using metaphors which suggest that The Past is a *territory*, a realm or a region in which events are *located* as objects are in space. The second, which I shall lable the Confrontation Theory of Knowledge, is that of taking, as the paradigm of all knowledge, a situation in which we can literally see or grasp something, have it now before our eyes or in our hands. The third is a less familiar and more subtle error, that of confusing facts with events: confusing, for example, the *event* which was Lincoln's death, an event that occurred over 100 years ago, with the *fact* that Lincoln died in 1865, which is still a fact here and now.

The metaphor of The Past as a territory which the historian explores and in which he finds events as objects comes out clearly in the opening paragraph of Becker's essay.

"Everyone knows what the past is. We all have a comforting sense that it lies behind us, like a stretch of uneven country we have crossed; and it is often difficult to avoid the notion that one could easily, by turning around, walk back into this country of the past. That, at all events, is what we commonly think of the historian as doing: he works in the past, he explores the past in order to find out what men did and thought in the past. His business is to discover and set forth the 'facts' of history."⁴

Events, according to this metaphor, are objects located in The Past in the way that towns and villages are located in the State of Kansas. If we want to refresh our memories of the towns and villages through which we have just passed or to learn more about them, we can always retrace our steps and examine them in greater detail. This Spatialization of The Past is connected with the Confrontation Theory of Knowledge, since the suggestion is clearly

⁴ Becker, *op. cit.* p. 120.

that we are entitled to speak of knowledge of The Past only if we *can* return into it and have the events that it contains right there before our eyes, if we can pick them up, handle them, and examine them closely on all sides. But this, alas!, is just what historians can never do. And because they can never revisit The Past, they can never re-examine it and thus come to know it better. It is true that this is only a metaphor and that Becker is about to break down the comfortable illusion that the metaphor engenders; but the significant fact is that, in the course of breaking down the illusion, he never questions the metaphor itself. The naive view, he seems to say, is that The Past is a territory that we *can* revisit and explore; the true view is that it is a territory that we *cannot*. But in fact our inability to revisit The Past is an *a priori* inability; it makes no sense to speak either of doing so or of failing to do so; and the morals to be drawn are not those that Constructionists draw, that there are no hard facts and that historical events never actually happened, but that events are not spatial objects and that historical knowledge is not an affair of witnessing past events.

The same combination of spatialization and confrontation comes out well in the work of Professor Jack Meiland, who uses it first to support a sceptical view and then to support a Constructionist view of historical knowledge. "The historian," he writes, "should not be regarded as trying to discover facts about an independently existing *realm* of past events"; and he thinks it important to insist on this because historians typically, and according to Meiland wrongly, "regard themselves as *probing a realm* called 'the past' and *detecting* events, institutions, trends and so on that are *lodged in that realm*."⁵ But it is only by pressing these spatial metaphors harder than they will bear that scepticism can get a foothold. If a piece of food is uncomfortably lodged in my teeth, the dentist will probe my mouth—the realm in which it is lodged—to remove it. And if he is unsuccessful the first and second times, he may return again and again to his probing because my mouth is still there—still, in the philosophical jargon, 'exists in the present'—for him to probe into. In the same way, a historian, worried by a problem, might be said to *return* to it again and again in his *search* for a solution. The spatial words 'return' and 'search' provide apt metaphors for the historian's activity—so apt indeed that we no

⁵ *Scepticism and Historical Knowledge*. New York: Random House, 1965, pp. 192, 190. (My italics.)

longer think of them as metaphors at all. But what the historian does could, at the cost of being pedestrian, be described without using any metaphors at all. "I tried the day before yesterday to make up my mind as to whether Danton instigated the September Massacres or not, and I failed; I tried again yesterday, and I still failed; so I shall try again today."

To say that the problem still exists is simply to say that it has not yet been solved, that I do not yet know what I want to know; but this in no way entails that Danton's instigation of the massacres (if he did instigate them) still exists. We are only tempted to suppose that it does if we are under the illusion that to think truly about Danton and his activities is to have *them* here and now 'before our minds' in some quite literal sense which entails their *present* existence. If we take this view seriously, we cannot think about Danton at all, since he died long ago. We can think about Mr. Nixon, but only about what he is doing now, not about what he said or did in the election campaign of 1968, because those events are lodged in the inaccessible Past. That this absurdity is no vagary of philosophers, who are well known to be professional purveyors of absurdity, I shall now try to show by examining Becker's essay in some detail.

II

Becker raised the questions '*Where* is the historical fact?' and '*When* is the historical fact?' and his answer to both these was, as I said, 'Here and now in the mind of the historian.' I want now to suggest to you that his answer to the first of these questions is a wrong answer and that the second question is an absurd question which can only seem to arise because a wrong answer has been given to the first.

"Where now," asks Becker, "is the historical fact that Lincoln was assassinated in Ford's Theater on the 14th of April, 1865?" Notice, first, that he does not ask where the historical *event*, Lincoln's assassination, is but where the historical *fact* is. That is correct; for we do not think or speak of past events as existing now, so that we are not even tempted to ask where they now are; but this is precisely how we do speak of historical facts. It is (still) a fact that Lincoln was assassinated. The first answer to this question that Becker considers is "The fact is in the records—in contemporary newspapers, diaries etc." This answer, which I believe to be cor-

rect, he rejects for a reason that is so packed with epistemological errors that it is worth quoting in full.

"The records are after all only paper, over the surface of which ink has been distributed in certain patterns. And even these patterns were not made by the actual occurrence, the assassination of Lincoln. The patterns are themselves only 'histories' of the event, made by someone who had in *his* mind an image or idea of Lincoln's assassination. Of course we, you and I, can, by looking at these inky patterns, form in *our* minds images or ideas more or less like those in the mind of the person who made the patterns. But if there were now no one in the world who could make any meaning out of the patterned records or sources, the fact of Lincoln's assassination would cease to be an historical fact."⁶

One error here, of which I wish I had time to say more, is the assumption that historiography is entirely a matter of *testimony*; we are only entitled to assert something as an historical fact if it was somewhere placed on record, a record we can read and understand.⁷ The second assumption is that knowing that Lincoln died—even just thinking about Lincoln's death in some other way, such as wondering how he died—is an affair of having *images* before one's mind. A third is the related error of supposing that understanding someone else's statement that Lincoln died is an affair of having images more or less similar to the images that he has or had.

Having, erroneously as I think, rejected this answer, Becker goes on to consider another, which he also rejects.

"At all events, the historical facts lying dead in the records, can do nothing good or evil in the world. They become historical facts, capable of doing work, of making a difference, only when someone, you or I, brings them alive in our minds by means of pictures, images or ideas of the actual occurrence. For this reason I say that the historical fact is in someone's mind or it is nowhere, because when it is in no one's mind, it lies in the records inert, incapable of making a difference

⁶ Becker, *op. cit.* pp. 125-26.

⁷ R. G. Collingwood's distinction between 'critical history' which is based on testimony and 'scientific history,' which is based on evidence (*The Idea of History*, pp. 258-82) is of great importance; yet it is usually ignored by historians, when they are not writing history but writing about historiography. For example, Louis Gottschalk, in *Understanding History*, has much to say about the proper approach to testimony but nothing at all about evidence.

in the world. . . . But perhaps you will say that the assassination of Lincoln has made a difference in the world, and that this difference is even now effectively working, even if, for a moment, or an hour or a week, no one in the world has the image of the actual occurrence in mind."⁸

Becker agrees that Lincoln's assassination did make a difference to the world and that this difference is now effectively working. But he rejects this answer to his question on the grounds that "it is the persisting historical fact, rather than the ephemeral actual event, which makes a difference to us now; and the historical fact makes a difference only because it is, and in so far as it is, in human minds."

Now this last statement is simply untrue. It is, of course, true that there is *one* sort of difference that historical facts make only when and because people think about them. What we do, as individuals and as nations, notoriously depends on how we think of ourselves, in particular how we think of our past. Perhaps the British would not have responded as they did to Churchill's call in 1940 if they had no traditions about Drake and Raleigh and Nelson. (Perhaps too our naval strategy would not have been so inept but for those same traditions.) But all this is as true of historical fictions, of George Washington and the cherry tree and of the Black Hole of Calcutta, as it is of historical facts. Moreover, this is not, or is not the *only* type of difference that Becker had in mind. He clearly had in mind differences of quite another kind, differences made, not by people's *beliefs*, true or false, about their past, but by the actual events of their past; and these differences do *not* only exist as and when people are thinking about them.

Historians are usually reluctant to speculate about what would have happened if: if Pompey had defeated Caesar; if the Moslems had defeated the Christians in the ninth century, if Louis XVI had not been caught and turned back at Varennes. But if they want to say, as Becker clearly does, that some historical events have 'made a difference,' they are committed to such counter-factual speculations, even if only of a very broad and sketchy kind. They are committed to the view that things are now other than they would have been if the event in question had not occurred. Becker presumably had in mind some such thesis as this: If Lincoln had lived a few years longer, Reconstruction in the South would have taken

⁸ Becker, *op. cit.* p. 126.

a very different course; there would have been far less bitterness between blacks and whites; the Democratic Party would not have enjoyed a solid majority in the South for the next hundred years, and so on. These differences persist, are still "alive and effectively working" today in the sense that it is quite likely that, if Lincoln had lived a few more years, Mr. Nixon would not now be in the White House and Mr. Wallace would not be figuring out how to get there in 1972. But it is quite clear that *these* differences, as opposed to the image-of-our-nation's-past differences, do not exist only when someone happens to be thinking about Lincoln's death. You might as well argue that the difference in the illumination of a room caused by someone's pressing the switch only persists while he is thinking about his pressing of the switch. There must be hosts of events, especially in the remote past, which have made an enormous difference to our lives even if no one now thinks, or even could think, about them. The invention of the wheel is an example. It is a platitude that an historian is not entitled to assert 'as a fact' that such and such an event occurred unless he has—here and now—adequate evidence; but this gives no support either to the view that 'Lincoln's death is an historical fact' *means* 'the consequences of Lincoln's death are still with us' or to the view that these consequences exist only when someone happens to be thinking about them.

I turn now to the first of Becker's rejected answers: the historical fact is *in the records*. A detective, at the end of his investigation, might lay a bulky file on the Chief Constable's desk with the words 'here, sir, are the facts' or 'here are all the facts you need to bring a charge against John Doe.' He might also hand the Chief Constable a carving knife with John Doe's finger-prints on the handle and traces of Richard Roe's blood on the blade. But these are not facts, for all that it is a fact that the finger-prints are Doe's and the blood Roe's. Nor is the *event*, the murder which took place weeks before, here and now in the room with the detective and the Chief Constable, either in their minds or between the covers of the file. This is not because the event is now somewhere else, in a place called The Past, for example; it is because it does not make sense to speak of an event which took place weeks ago as being *now anywhere*. (We do, of course, say that the murder is 'in the minds of' the detective and the Chief Constable while they are discussing it; it might also be very much *on* their minds, if the

press and public are clamouring for results; and of course we also say that the event took place some time 'in the past.' But the first of these locutions only means that they are thinking of or are worried about the murder, and the second only that it occurred and is not now occurring. Yet, to make his point, the sceptic has to take these spatial metaphors seriously; and when he does so, his intelligence is bewitched by language.)

What, then, do we mean by such expressions as 'you will find the facts about sperm whales in any good encyclopedia'? Simply that you will find in any good encyclopedia reliable information about sperm whales. Or consider the sentence: You will find the true facts about the Black Hole of Calcutta, not in Macaulay, but in Bergen Evans' book, *The Spoor of Spooks*.⁹ This means, roughly: Macaulay told one story about the Black Hole; Bergen Evans tells quite a different story; Evans' story is substantially true, but Macaulay's is not. Similarly, 'we haven't got enough facts to go on' means 'we don't know enough,' and 'the facts won't all come to light till John publishes his memoirs' means 'we shan't know all about this till John publishes his memoirs and then we shall.'

We use the expression 'it is a fact that . . .' mainly to contrast matters of fact with matters of taste and matters of opinion, with guesses, surmises, speculations, and hypotheses. 'I can tell you for a fact that'; 'we don't know all the facts'; 'you can't get round the fact that'; 'the lecturer got all his facts wrong'; facts are brute, cold, hard, stubborn, inescapable. The conclusion to which these and many other locutions with 'fact' point is that 'fact' is an *epistemological* word, not, like 'thing,' 'person,' 'event,' 'quality,' and 'relation' the name of an ontological category. There have been in the world, there are, and (we hope) there will be things, persons, events, qualities, relations, times, places, and so on. It is not my task to give a complete list of categories or to discuss the question whether some of these are 'reducible to' others. The point is that the word 'fact' must not appear in any such list, if only for the reason that there are facts in every category. It is a fact that Socrates was a man, that he was snub-nosed, that he was married to Xanthippe, that he lived in Athens, that he lived in the fifth century b.c. When I say that these are facts, I am vouching for, claiming to know or at least to have very good reason to believe, that the corresponding statements are true. One of the things that would

⁹ London, Michael Joseph, 1955, pp. 70-75.

prove me wrong would be Socrates' not being married to Xanthippe; but another would be the discovery that the evidence on which this belief of mine is based turns out to be mere gossip. (While I am sure that 'fact' is an epistemological word, I confess to being quite unsure how to place 'situation' and 'state of affairs.' Is the present situation in Northern Ireland as much 'in the world' as the inhabitants, their dissensions, their policies and their lack of policy are undoubtedly in the world? I do not know.)

To say 'it is a fact that Lincoln was assassinated' is to comment, not on the ontological status of Lincoln's death, but on the epistemological status of the proposition that Lincoln was assassinated. It is, or it is certainly very like saying 'We know that Lincoln was assassinated' or 'that Lincoln was assassinated is beyond dispute'; and, like these expressions, it necessarily has a reference to people's *minds*—to what they know, what they believe, what they infer, what reasons they can give for asserting what they assert. But it is both easy and fatal to pass from this correct appreciation of the fact that all talk about facts is necessarily and always talk about people's minds to the quite grotesque position that when people say such things as 'it is a fact that Lincoln was assassinated,' Lincoln's assassination, the *event*, is something that exists *now* and only exists in their minds. That this is precisely the step that Becker does take is shown by his treatment of his next question: '*When* is the historical fact?'. Since he has concluded that the historical fact exists *here*, in our minds, it is not surprising that he goes on to say that the historical fact exists *now*.

"I am thinking of the Congress of Berlin, and that is without doubt history—the real thing. The historical facts of the Congress of Berlin I bring alive in memory, imaginatively. But I am making an image of the Congress of Berlin for a purpose; and indeed without a purpose no one would take the trouble to bring historical facts to mind. My purpose happens to be to convey this image of the Congress of Berlin to my class in History 42, in Room C, tomorrow afternoon at 3 o'clock. Now I find that inseparable from this image of the Congress of Berlin, which occurred in the past, are flitting images of myself conveying this image of the Congress of Berlin to my class tomorrow in Room C. I picture myself standing there monotonously talking, I hear the labored sentences painfully issuing forth, I picture the

students' faces alert or bored as the case may be; so that images of this future event enter into the imagined picture of the Congress of Berlin, a past event; enter into it, coloring and shaping it too, to the end that the performance may do credit to me, or be intelligible to immature minds, or be compressed within the limits of fifty minutes, or to accomplish some other desired end. Well, this living historical fact, this mixed image of . . . the Congress of Berlin—is it past, present or future? I cannot say."¹⁰

Becker is at a loss to tell us when this 'mixed image,' which he confuses with the Congress of Berlin, is or was or will be; but we can tell him. He is describing his own state of mind as he reflects on the business of lecturing about the Congress of Berlin; and this reflection took place—probably more than once—at some time before—probably not long before—he wrote the article in which this piece of phenomenological description occurs, some time in the nineteen twenties or thirties. Now I am far from wishing to decry phenomenological descriptions; in the hands of a James, a Proust, or a Joyce they have an honored place in literature; and perhaps all of us, as teachers and students, could learn much from what great teachers and students tell us about how they prepare their lectures. But what has all this to do with the Congress of Berlin, which took place in 1878, or with our knowledge that there was such a congress and of what was said and done there? Suppose that just after he has delivered his lecture on the Congress of Berlin we go up to Becker and challenge him. How do you know, we ask, that Bismark was sincere in the admiration he expressed for Disraeli or that Disraeli was not bluffing the Russians when he ordered a special train? How, in general, do you know that there ever was such a congress and that what you have told us was said and done there really was said and done? If we were lucky enough to find him in historical rather than philosophical mood, he would not give us an account of the thoughts that passed through his mind while lecturing—still less of the images, relevant and irrelevant, with which those thoughts might or might not have been accompanied; he would give us his *reasons* for believing what he said in his lecture, which is a very different matter.

In giving us his reasons, Becker would have referred to documents published at the time and, more fruitfully, to documents

¹⁰ Becker, *op. cit.* p. 128.

written at the time but not published; and he would have given us his reasons for believing (in part) what those documents contain. He would also, as Collingwood reminds us, have drawn inferences from what the participants did not say and did not do. (It was the remarkable behaviour of the dog which did *not* bark that led Sherlock Holmes to the right solution in *Silver Blaze*.) But in giving a phenomenological description of his state of mind in place of what we want, which is a reconstruction of the logic of his reasoning, Becker seems to be confusing the important truth that an historian should not assert anything as a fact unless he has, here and now, good reasons for so doing with the absurd view that the historian must be thinking all the time, *not* about the Congress of Berlin, *but* about the contents of his own consciousness. And this is precisely the error of passing from the truth of Oakeshott's slogan to the falsity of Ranke's. Perhaps I have not yet shown this to be an error; in the next section I shall argue that any sceptic who insists that it is not, insists that we must always be talking about our own 'experience,' is in for more trouble than he bargained for.

III

Scepticism is of interest here only as a stage on the road to the Constructionist view of historiography, the view that we can, after all, have knowledge of the past—provided we remember that it is not knowledge of the 'real past' as it actually happened, but of the 'historical past' as the historian constructs it. I shall argue, first, that if the sceptical argument succeeds, our knowledge of the past cannot be salvaged by any theory of the past as a hypothetical construct, and secondly that the sceptical argument cannot succeed. Three points about scepticism in general need to be borne in mind.

First, the sceptic typically contrasts a class of objects that, he says, we cannot know with a corresponding class of objects that, he says, we can and do know. The Sceptic About Other Minds says that each of us can know in an unproblematic way much about his own mind, but cannot, or cannot in the same unproblematic way, know what is going on in the minds of others or even that Others have Minds at all; and the sceptic who says that we cannot know that all *As* are ϕ has no qualms about his knowledge that this is an *A* and that this *A* is ϕ . Secondly—though this is not always made explicit—the sceptic who trains his guns on a particular target will usually take for granted the unproblematic character of our

knowledge of those other targets on which his guns are not at the moment trained. Thus the Sceptic About Other Minds can often be found, openly or covertly, assuming the existence of Material Objects; and the Logical Positivists, in 'reducing' material objects to sense-data, often seemed to take for granted the existence of Actual or Hypothetical Observers, who are only Other Minds under another name.

A third point to notice about scepticism is that the true sceptic has doubts about *every* application of the concept under attack. Scepticism about Memory, for example, is not a psychological worry as to the reliability of my memory in respect of what happened many years ago—a worry that can and does exist happily alongside complete confidence in my memory as to what happened a few minutes ago; it is an epistemological worry about memory in general as a source of knowledge. How, he wonders, can *anything* that he now thinks he remembers give *any* support at all to—let alone prove—some statement about how things were in the world at any time before now. 'How do I know that I have just had a beer?' is for him as worrisome a question as 'How do I know that I had a beer on the 14th of July, 1940?'. Similarly the Sceptic About The Past is as much worried by the recent as by the remote past. That is why Russell's conjecture that the world might have been created five minutes ago, complete as it now is with all the archaeological remains and all our present memories, fails to capture the spirit of Scepticism About The Past. What worries him is the little word 'ago'; and it matters not at all whether this little word appears in a proposition about what happened a million years or a millionth of a second ago. It is the *past tense*, as such, that worries him; and it worries him because he thinks that propositions in the past tense are somehow necessarily less certain, less secure than propositions in the present tense. Perhaps this is why the Idealist slogan 'all history is contemporary history' sounds so comforting; historical statements, it seems to say, are not about the problematic Past but about the unproblematic Present. I shall now argue that this comfort is illusory; no salvation lies in rejecting the real past, as what actually happened, in favour of the historical past, as a present hypothetical construct.

What is gained, if the sceptical argument is right, by the claim that "the past that the historian evokes is not a real past as it was

when it was present, but . . . a hypothetical construct"?¹¹ At an early stage in his investigation the detective will—at least if crime fiction is to be trusted—‘reconstruct’ the crime. He will ‘construct a hypothesis’ to the effect that it was John Doe who killed Richard Roe, and just how and when and why he killed him. There is a point, at this stage, in saying that the detective’s theory is ‘only hypothetical,’ this phrase being used to mark the fact that he is not yet prepared to say that this is what did, or must have happened; only that it may or might have happened. But, if all goes well with his investigation, there will come a time when the evidence obliges him to believe that what he formerly surmised must indeed have been the case. What *now* can be the point of referring to the murder by John Doe of Richard Roe as a hypothetical construct? It would be rather odd to say, when we have conclusive evidence, that the detective’s *theory* is still ‘only a hypothesis’; to say *at any time* that the *murder* (if there was one) is a hypothetical construct is catastrophic, since ‘hypothesis,’ like ‘fact’ is an epistemological word.

The arguments used to show that historical events, the events mentioned in history books, are hypothetical constructs, must, as I said, apply equally to all past events, even to an event so humble as my having had eggs for breakfast this morning. This event, according to the Constructionist, is a hypothetical construct constructed to explain the present state of my digestive organs. Is this too, the present state of my digestion, a hypothetical construct? If the Constructionist says that it is not—his being a theory about past events only—we may ask him how this morning’s hypothetical eggs can explain the present real state of my digestive organs. And why should the present state of my organs provide any more support for this hypothesis than some other—for example that I ate iron filings or arsenic or nothing at all? At this point the Sceptic About The Past is covertly relying on an unproblematic knowledge of the present state of my digestion and an unproblematic general knowledge of the different effects on human digestive organs of eggs, iron filings and arsenic—knowledge to which, as I shall try to show, he has no title if he cannot have an equally unproblematic knowledge of the past.

Or suppose that I complain to the doctor of pains in my abdomen. On the basis of what I tell him and of what he finds when

¹¹ Goldstein, *op. cit.* p. 177.

he feels my body with his hands, he constructs the tentative hypothesis that I have an inflamed appendix because some small object which I had previously swallowed is lodged there. Finally he cuts me open and finds a small stone in my appendix. Will the Constructionist say that the stone, when he finds it 'in the present' is a real one, but that when it got into my appendix it was not? If the Constructionist is telling us that the doctor's diagnosis was 'constructed,' meaning by this that it was not a report of his present experience when he felt my body but was arrived at by applying general concepts and general knowledge that he had acquired from books and from years of experience, we need not quarrel with him. That is uncontentious; but it in no way supports the view that the stone, when it entered my body, was less real than it is now when the doctor finds it or the view that the entry of the stone into my appendix was not something that actually happened. Indeed, if it did not actually happen, the doctor's diagnosis was mistaken; for, once again, if the evidence obliges us to believe anything at all, it obliges us to believe that such and such actually happened.

Perhaps someone will say that my insistence on the point that if Scepticism About The Past is valid at all it applies to the recent past as much as to the past studied by historians totally misses the point of *historical* scepticism, and thereby misses the point of a constructionist theory. What worries the historian is precisely the fact that, in his work, there is nothing which corresponds to the doctor's finding the stone in my story. The doctor's hypothesis about the stone can be verified by finding it; the historian's cannot be verified in any such way. About this argument two things need to be said. The first is that historians are often faced with genuine difficulties of this kind. Since modern governments keep reliable statistical records we can discover, if we wish, how many people lived in London in 1950. But an historian might want to know more accurately than he does how many people lived in London in 1450 or in Athens in 450 b.c.; and this, perhaps, he will never know since no records were kept and there is no other way of finding out. But it is essential not to confuse, as we so often do, the historian's *genuine* lament 'If only I could find out the truth about such and such which, for contingent reasons, I cannot!' with the sceptic's sweeping, non-contingent, *pseudo*-lament 'If only I could find out the truth about anything at all in the past, but necessarily I cannot!'; and it is only the latter type of scepticism that gives rise

to a supposed need to re-interpret historical knowledge in a constructionist way.

The second point to be made is that it is just untrue to say that there is, and can be, nothing in history to correspond to the doctor's verification of his diagnosis; in fact Goldstein himself provides a very striking example of just this.

"The German historian Giesebrecht pointed out that certain chronicles of the eleventh century drew their information from a common source which was no longer available. So sure was he of their dependence on this very early chronicle . . . that he constructed the missing manuscript from these later derivatives. Some twenty years later the missing chronicle was found, and it confirmed these shrewd conjectures in every important particular."¹²

It would certainly be proper to say that Giesebrecht 'constructed' the theory that there must have been a chronicle which was now missing, that he 'reconstructed' this chronicle, and that, at this stage, his theory was 'only a hypothesis.' But when the missing chronicle turned up, his theory changed its status from that of hypothesis to that of established fact. What we must not do—and what the sceptic must do to get his argument going—is to refer to the *chronicle* itself or to its *past existence* as hypothetical constructs. Between the time when Giesebrecht published his reconstruction and the time of the discovery of the chronicle, no doubt people said 'Giesebrecht's chronicle is only a hypothesis.' But this must be taken as a compendious *façon de parler*; the Constructionist's position depends on taking it *au pied de la lettre*.

I shall now argue that Scepticism About The Past is untenable on the grounds that every argument the sceptic uses can be turned with equal cogency on The Present and, ultimately, on any knowledge that, while denying knowledge of The Past, he supposes himself to have.

(1) It will be remembered that Becker's scepticism and Meiland's both stemmed, at least in part, from a contrast that they think we can draw between our *ability* to revisit and explore a territory and our *inability* to revisit and explore The Past. Suppose that we are out for a walk and begin to wonder whether there were five or six pine trees in the clump we passed half an hour ago.

¹² Goldstein, op. cit. p. 182.

If it is important for us to settle this question, we can retrace our steps and count the trees. But this, says the sceptic, is just what the historian cannot do; he cannot retrace his steps into The Past to satisfy himself as to the existence and nature of some event which he believes to have occurred there. As an argument for Scepticism About The Past this is a non-starter because it presupposes that we *can* have knowledge of the very kind that the sceptic uses it to show that we *cannot* have; our supposedly unproblematic knowledge in the spatial case, whose function is to throw into relief the problematic character of our knowledge in the temporal case, turns out to depend on the possibility of temporal knowledge. For consider: we first passed the pine trees at ten o'clock; our doubt occurred and we began to retrace our steps at ten thirty; when we regain the pine trees and count them it is eleven. But how can the discovery at eleven o'clock that there are *now* six trees settle, or even have any bearing on, the doubt we *had* at ten thirty, which was itself a doubt as to how many there *were* at ten? Revisiting the trees and counting them is a relevant procedure only if we are entitled to assume that pine trees do not come to be or pass away or move around within the hour, to assume that finding six trees *now* is relevant to the question whether there were six trees *then*. In short, the Sceptic About History can only get his argument going if he is allowed not to be a Sceptic About Geography as well; but his assumed knowledge of geography depends on his ability to have knowledge of history.

(2) There are many concepts that can be applied in the present tense only if certain other concepts can be applied in the past tense. John cannot now be sobering up if he was not formerly drunk; James cannot now be recovering from snakebite if he was not formerly bitten by a snake; Peter cannot now stop beating his wife if he never beat her, and Paul cannot now be catching a fly ball that no one formerly hit into the air. An extension of this line of thought will greatly impoverish, even if it does not entirely eliminate, all our talk about The Present.

(3) What is the Constructionist to make of such assertions as that skirts are now being worn shorter than they used to be? This is a statement about both The Present and The Past; but the word 'now' does not refer to an instant of time (if there are such things); it means 'nowadays' and is used to contrast a stretch of time, in this case about ten years, with an earlier time. My point now is not

that this assertion could not be *true* unless skirts were, actually were, worn longer at an earlier time; it is the stronger point that it would not even be *intelligible* unless we were able to apply temporal concepts. At this point the Constructionist has two choices. He can say, first, that since his is a theory about The Past, the length of skirts in 1961 is a hypothetical construct, but their length in 1971, being a present fact, is not. This is the line that Becker seems to take; but there are formidable difficulties about it, chief among which is the question as to how hypothetical past eggs could account for the present real state of my stomach. The suggestion that, in the statement about the comparative lengths of skirts, we are comparing a real length with a hypothetically constructed length is, to say the least, rather odd; and the onus is certainly on the Constructionist to explain not only why he says it but what it means.

Alternatively, the Constructionist might take the line that the present length of skirts is also a hypothesis constructed to explain something, and Goldstein's assimilation of 'the real past' to Hylas's material substance suggests that this is the line he would take. But if so, let us be clear that what is at stake has nothing specially to do with history. On this view, if past events are constructs, so also is the fight of which a sports commentator gives a blow-by-blow account as it is fought before his very eyes; what is at stake is not Scepticism About The Past, but a much wider scepticism that threatens to become *total*, hence unsayable, hence uninteresting.

Consider the proposition that skirts are now being worn eight inches above the knee, a proposition wholly about The Present. What could be the ground for saying that the present length of skirts is a hypothetical construct? Perhaps it is that the remark is a Universal Proposition about all or most skirts or a remark about something as abstract as a fashion. If so, what of the proposition that Mary's skirt is, here and now, eight inches above her knee? Is the length of her skirt a hypothetical construct? If so, is the skirt itself? Is her knee? If all of these are called hypothetical constructs, it is beginning to emerge that the ultimate reason for calling *anything* a hypothetical construct is simply this: in naming it or referring to it, we are not just pointing to *it*, the bare particular, but using some such general term as 'length,' 'skirt' or 'knee.' To use such general terms is already to employ general concepts, to classify this object as a skirt, that object as a knee. *And*, says

the sceptic, *the concepts we employ might be other than what they are*. So all our references to objects are 'hypothetical' in the rather strained sense of being tentative, provisional, liable to alteration if our language changes.

I am by no means convinced that the proposition that all our concepts might be other than they are, which is the foundation of all scepticism and hence of all constructionism, is true or even intelligible. But if it is true, it empties the concept of a hypothetical construct of all useful meaning. For it now appears that whenever we say anything at all we must be talking about hypothetical constructs; the "experienced objects that Philonous wants to talk about" are either just as much hypothetical constructs as Hylas' material things or they are *unmentionable*. For, whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. The Sceptic About The Past who takes this line cannot stop short at Scepticism About The Past, but must end, like Cratylus, not talking but pointing.

This brings me to two final arguments for historical scepticism that I can only deal with very briefly. It is often said that we cannot give an account of the past as it actually was because each generation necessarily sees the past through the eyes of the present. The historian selects and arranges facts; he does this in a manner made possible by his contemporary scheme of concepts which may well be different from that of an earlier or of a later historian; and this, it is said, implies that he distorts, *necessarily* distorts the facts. But once again the sceptical argument confuses a genuine insight with a falsehood. It is an obvious, though perhaps not a trivial, truth that an historian can only say things in the language he has got, which may well be different from the language used by the people about whom he is writing. It may also be richer. *We* can say that real wages were falling continuously and rather rapidly during the first half of the seventeenth century; agricultural laborers at that time could not have said that—for all that they must have known that their pennies bought less and less each year. But it does not follow that this statement about real wages is not true or that it is, in any pejorative sense, a distortion of the facts. To say that would imply—what might, of course, be true, but does not have to be—that the records on which our statement is based were unrepresentative or in some other way inadequate, or that we had misinterpreted them. To interpret figures is not necessarily, as the sceptic implies, to *misinterpret* them. Moreover, the argument, if valid,

would apply equally to the present; from the fact that a tribe has no expression for 'matrilinear kinship system,' perhaps because it has never occurred to them that society could be organized in any other way, it does not follow that they have not (really) got such a system.

This pseudo-lament that historians cannot help distorting the past is connected with my last point—the idea that Ranke's ideal is impossible because we cannot know *everything* that actually happened. We swear in court to tell the whole truth; but who could possibly do that? The argument, which is closely paralleled in Becker and elsewhere, runs as follows: The witness swears that he saw John Doe, whom he knows by sight, running away from the scene of the crime. But if it was really John Doe, it was a man who weighs exactly one hundred and eighty-six pounds, has a mole of precisely such and such a shape on his left forearm, can do multiplication but not quadratics, likes his steak medium rare, and so on. But the witness cannot possibly swear to all of that; consequently he does not, and cannot, know the *whole* truth. The witness's statement is a simplified, hence a distorted, account of what actually happened. This argument commits two errors. First, it confuses truth with wealth of detail; it suggests that the statement that Caesar crossed the Rubicon is untrue, or at best distorted, because it does not tell us at what time of day he embarked, how many men he took with him and what their names were. Secondly it trades on lamenting the impossibility of fulfilling an ideal that it is logically impossible to fulfill.

Suppose we rephrase Ranke's remark to read 'the task of the historian is to list all the events that have actually happened.' We could no more embark on this task than we could embark on that of listing everything in this room if we were not told what is to count as a 'thing.' Is the chair on which I now sit one thing, a chair? Or five things, four legs and a seat? Or millions and millions of things, sub-atomic particles? Normally the context will tell us what is to count as a thing, and the same is true of history; in a small-scale work the French Revolution will be one event, in a larger scale work it will be many. Once again, the pseudo-lament 'Alas! we can never know everything' is a metaphysical sigh over a logical impossibility; but it is the shadow, the monstrous *Doppel-gaenger*, of a very genuine difficulty. Very often historians cannot find out as much detail as they need to find out in order to support

some interesting account or interpretation, to solve some historical problem. That is just too bad; it means that many a fine historical thesis, about the rise of the gentry for example, can never be adequately established; but this by no means entails that no historical thesis can ever be established; and it is a perennial source both of hope and of delight that, since historians began to use evidence rather than testimony as the basis for their theories, they have discovered all sorts of novel ways of finding out what actually happened.

The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund was established in 1941 in memory of Ernest H. Lindley, Chancellor of the University of Kansas from 1920 to 1939. In February 1941 Mr. Roy Roberts, the chairman of the committee in charge, suggested in the *Graduate Magazine* that

the Chancellor should invite to the University for a lecture or a series of lectures, some outstanding national or world figure to speak on "Values of Living"—just as the late Chancellor proposed to do in his courses "The Human Situation" and "Plan for Living."

In the following June Mr. Roberts circulated a letter on behalf of the Committee, proposing in somewhat broader terms that

The income from this fund should be spent in a quest of social betterment by bringing to the University each year outstanding world leaders for a lecture or series of lectures, yet with a design so broad in its outline that in the years to come, if it is deemed wise, this living memorial could take some more desirable form.

The fund was allowed to accumulate until 1954, when Professor Richard McKeon lectured on "Human Rights and International Relations." The next lecture was given in 1959 by Professor Everett C. Hughes, and has been published by the University of Kansas School of Law as part of his book *Students' Culture and Perspectives: Lectures on Medical and General Education*. The selection of lecturers for the Lindley series has since been delegated to the Department of Philosophy. The following lectures have been published, and may be obtained from the Department at a price of seventy-five cents each.

1961. "The Idea of Man—An Outline of Philosophical Anthropology."
By José Ferrater Mora, Professor of Philosophy, Bryn Mawr College.
1962. "Changes in Events and Changes in Things."
By A. N. Prior, Professor of Philosophy, University of Manchester.
1963. "Moral Philosophy and the Analysis of Language."
By Richard B. Brandt, Professor of Philosophy, Swarthmore College.
1964. "Human Freedom and the Self."
By Roderick M. Chisholm, Professor of Philosophy, Brown University.
1965. "Freedom of Mind."
By Stuart Hampshire, Professor of Philosophy, Princeton University.
1966. "Some Beliefs about Justice."
By William K. Frankena, Professor of Philosophy, University of Michigan.
1967. "Form and Content in Ethical Theory."
By Wilfrid Sellars, Professor of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh.
1968. "The Systematic Unity of Value."
By J. N. Findlay, Clark Professor of Philosophy, Yale University.
1969. "Buber and Buberism—A Critical Evaluation."
By Paul Edwards, Professor of Philosophy, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York.